



Riach, A. (2016) A flyting philosophy distilled from Scottish literature. *National*, 2016, 25 Nov.

This is the author's final accepted version.

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Deposited on: 01 December 2017

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Reading the world

Alan Riach

In Ali Smith's most recent novel *Autumn*, an old man befriends a young woman, setting the tone of their relationship and giving her an imperative by which to live her life by asking whenever they meet, "What are you reading?" When Smith appeared on radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* recently she let slip her habit of reading everything, all the time: "The side of a pencil, the side of a bus..."

Reading is essentially no more nor less than critical evaluation, a continual appraisal of meaning and quality, which if we lapse from, allows the weeds in fast. The same might be said of any work we do towards the interpretation of art. In his indispensable book *Dear Sibelius: Letter from a Junky*, Marshall Walker describes his boyhood friendship with the composer and principal conductor of the BBC Scottish Orchestra, Ian Whyte. Recognising the potential and growing musical appreciation in the boy, Whyte would greet him at every meeting, right up to the last encounter when he was in his hospital bed, with the question, "Now what have you been listening to...?"

Because people are animals who depend upon learning, one generation failing to do this means it all has to start over again. Education is one word for how it's passed on. This is one possible partial explanation of the way things are going and have gone, politically, today. Last week we talked about genre fiction and "the power of mass persuasion". With literature, it helps to keep the remit open, to include all sorts of things as well as poems, fiction and plays, such as "life writing": journals, letters, autobiography, speculative writing, including philosophy, which brings us to George Davie (1912-2007).

In his books *The Democratic Intellect* (1961) and *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (1986), Davie focused on the history of tertiary education in Scotland. Davie argued that the basis of the generalist four-year Scottish degree encouraged a broad-based humanist understanding, as opposed to the dedicated specialisms more common in England. The notion of an education that encourages specialisation but maintains that any specialisation should be kept open, and not be closed off by privileges of jargon, class or economic advantage, informs Davie's books and retains potent political currency. It was linked to MacDiarmid and his assertive yoking together of Scottish Republican Nationalism with Communism – a radical

idealism that makes sense in Scottish, rather than imperial British, terms. The aspiration of intellectual elitism maintained in society as an egalitarian right to which every person should have access remains profoundly significant in the early 21st century.

The social significance of Davie's educational thinking can be traced back through another literary genre: autobiography. Among the major Scottish figures in this tradition, James Boswell (1740-95) was not only the biographer of Samuel Johnson; it was his travel writing, his *Account of Corsica* (1768) that made him internationally famous and his London diaries that show us today the incipient significance of that city's maelstrom attraction, while his *Journal of a Tour to the Highlands* (1776) is an essential corrective to that of his pontificating companion.

Elizabeth Grant (1797-1886) in her *Memoirs* (1898) gives a perceptive account of life in the Highlands, including encounters with Rob Roy and others, shrewd anecdotes and the sense of daily life in the context of what tourists saw – and see today – mainly as visual spectacle. Her writing crosses class barriers and her Irish journal national ones. In the 20th century, *My Scottish Youth* (1937) by R.H. Bruce Lockhart (1887-1970), head of the first British Mission to Russia's Bolshevik Government, contains a wealth of information about a pre-First World War Scotland, its local strengths and imperial ambitions. From a different perspective, first published during the Second World War, Hugh MacDiarmid's *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (1943) is a rollercoasting juggernaut of flashing sharp angles of perspective, outrageous stories, high good humour, contentious notions, poignant moments, unexpected scenes and startling, sometimes shocking perceptions. A valuable complement to it is *Octobiography* (1978), by Helen Cruickshank (1886-1975), a key figure in modern Scottish literature, friend and benefactor of MacDiarmid and many other writers, and a poet of distinction. Gavin Maxwell (1914-69), best known for *Ring of Bright Water* (1960), also wrote autobiographies, including *The House of Elrig* (1965), even more closely revealing his experience of wild animals and the elemental world. The autobiographies of Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999), *Small Talk: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood* (1973), *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage* (1975), *You May Well Ask: A Memoir, 1920-1940* (1979) and her wartime diaries *Among You Taking Notes* (1985) are richly detailed, presenting both her singular personality and her social and economic world.

If we keep in mind the relation between, on the one hand, individual character, idiosyncrasies of perspective and specialisation, and on the other, a social spectrum of wide and various forms of preference, as Davie suggests is or should be at the heart of education,

we can see how keeping the literary remit open – and open to all the arts – constitutes the most vital priority. This is what is increasingly under threat.

Such examples might be complemented by work devoted to food, drink, rituals and myths. Scottish classics of this kind would include the two compendium collections of recipes and good advice by F. Marian McNeill (1885-1973), *The Scots Kitchen: Its Traditions and Lore with Old-Time Recipes* (1929) and *The Scots Cellar: Its Traditions and Lore* (1973); her extended study of folklore and local festivals throughout Scotland was published as *The Silver Bough* (four volumes, 1957-68), the title answering the earlier anthropological magnum opus, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890) by another Scot, James Frazer (1854–1941).

Philosophy, autobiography, travel writing, writing on food, drink, myths and folklore – all these balance social behaviour and personal, internal consumption. So what of the internal mental world?

A singular contribution to psychology and medicine, very much of its time yet lastingly valuable, was made by RD Laing (1927-89), in case studies, speculative essays, quasi-fictional accounts and poems. The essential point Laing argued arose from the Freudian perception that a whole society might be described as mad, so that an individual categorised as insane might be the sanest character in a society which itself was “insane”.

Here we are. Think of Hamlet. Inexplicable impulses, strange behaviour, violent actions taken by young men or women in a family structure or society typified by constriction or oppression might be considered as the sanest response to such inimical force. The perception is social, personal, psychological, clinical but also intensely literary: it opens questions about what we see happening in the greatest of all tragedies, from ancient Greece through Shakespeare to a whole range of modern Scottish plays, and all great tragedy – indeed, all great comedy too – is based on the structure that has universal human application, the family, with all it entails of both support and constriction.

Introverted individuals might be the direct result of a bullying society. Folk are made silent, depressed and despondent by distant authorities empowered by force and mass media. It sounds familiar enough. But there’s one particularly Scottish answer: flyting. This is a distinct form of address with a long pedigree in Scottish literature. Flyting usually takes the form of a dialogue between poets, in which one hurls invective and abuse at the other, who then responds appropriately. An early example is that of William Dunbar and Walter Kennedy in the late 15th century. Another is that of Alexander Montgomerie and Patrick Hume of Polwarth, from the late 16th century. This is how it begins:

Vyld venymous vipper, wanthreivineſt of thingis,
Half ane elph, half ane aip, of nature denyit,
Thow flyttis and thow freittis, thou fartis and thow flingis;
Bot this bargane, unbeiſt, deir ſall thou buy it.

Or in my own English imitation:

Vile venomous viper, moſt ſtunted of things,
Half goblin, half monkey, unnatural beaſt,
You leap, ſhowing off, blaſting farts, throwing flings;
But this deal, you monſter, you'll pay for at leaſt!

In her edition of Montgomerie's poems, Helena Shire gives ſelections from his account of Polwarth's chriſtening-party, a Breughel-like fantaſmagoria, ribald, ſaturnalian, teetering on the edge of terror. Mrs Shire ſupplies a note after the third ſtanza: "Stanzas 4-7, a catalogue of diſeaſes, are omitted" before reſuming with ſtanza 8.

There are two kinds of flyting, one is playful, in which both practitioners know they are engaged in a competition of extremes. Linguistic energy, verbal precision, flamboyant rhetoric and wit are only ſome of the weapons put to uſe. In company, at parties, Norman MacCaig and Hugh MacDiarmid would ſometimes launch into a flyting, ſtarting with an occaſional remark about a topic on which a reſponse was sparked, eſcalating into a dazzling verbal diſplay that might leave thoſe preſent gasping. A viſiting poet once wiſſeſſed ſuch an encounter and afterwards remarked that he thought they were about to come to blows, physical violence. MacCaig told me that he replied, "No, not at all. He's my beſt friend. We were juſt having ſome fun."

The second type of flyting, though, is when it happens in deadly earnest. Tobias Smollett's attack on Admiral Knowles landed him in prison. An equally enraged and indignant work is MacDiarmid's book-length poem, *The Battle Continues* (1957), written in response to Roy Campbell's poem in praise of Franco and the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War, *Flowering Rifle* (1939). MacDiarmid opposes Campbell by praising the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca and all he stood for. He addresses Lorca: "You will be remembered when your foes are forgotten. / On the one side the People; on the other / The vain titles and vicious wealth / Of a worthless few. Chartres versus Versailles!"

MacDiarmid describes Campbell's "typical reader": "A stout man, walking with a waddle" who, with his "fat finger / Ticks off the feet in Campbell's lines / 'Left, right! Left, right!'" Then he turns on Campbell himself: "So you went for a soldier, did you, / Campbell? – a soldier in Spain? / The hero of a penny novelette / With the brain of a boy scout!"

In 2014 Alan Bissett published online one of the most ferocious polemical poems written this century, "Vote Britain". It moves through very serious issues indeed and uses extreme scorn and satire and ferocious comedy to prompt us to consider them. That combination of humour and seriousness is a literary skill, an approach or technique that runs back through MacDiarmid to Burns and Fergusson all the way to Dunbar, and is another example of the democratic strain that characterises Scottish literature. This is how "Vote Britain" begins: "People of Scotland, vote with your heart. / Vote with your love for the Queen who nurtured you, cradle to grave, / Who protects you and cares for you, her most darling subjects, to whom you gave the glens she adores to roam freely through, the stags her children so dearly enjoy killing. / First into battle, loyal and true. The enemy's scared of you."

More than 50,000 people read that poem or listened to it online in its first year of publication. That's a big audience. The impetus behind it was the drive towards Scottish independence. Another driving field of energy which has engaged beyond prediction is feminism. When Liz Lochhead published her first book, *Memo for Spring*, in 1972, its sales were phenomenal and her reputation was established. And yet, to her credit, there was never any question that she'd stay in a niche. Her development as a playwright as well as poet has enlivened her verse, especially the monologues, polemics and flytings, none more so than "Mirror's Song": "Smash me looking-glass glass / coffin, the one / that keeps your best black self on ice. / Smash me, she'll smash back – ' The poem ends by demolishing all the impositions

of fashion, advertising and patriarchal oppression, breaking things up “in the cave she will claw out of – / a woman giving birth to herself.”

If folk are to be open to the big questions and have some fun talking about them, the discussion needs to be snappy and sharp, and the whole world is the location in which the debate needs to take place, in popular culture and entertainment as much as in the most serious, esoteric or difficult arenas. Politics has for so long normally been the provenance of slippery, sneaky, snaky evaders of direct questions, the organised and impenetrable self-congratulators or the unapproachably smug and affluent. Radical thinking makes a different politics, informed by irreverence, imagination, honesty and respect for what matters. It gets us to the fundamental things. This is what close reading helps us to do. Or close listening.

When we open the maps to find the destination of a different Scotland, more democratic and less institutionally dominated, we know that even if the maps are wrong today, at least they show that the land is there. Whatever *actually* happens, or *can be made* to happen, change starts happening in the way you think about what *might* happen.